SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CONCEPT OF SOCIOLOGICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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The prospect of having eight colleagues tell of "their sociological lives in changing social structures" raises at once the not uninteresting question: Can we identify attributes distinctive of what we shall agree to call "sociological autobiography" that mark it off as a genre from other kinds of autobiography that have appeared over the centuries since at least the Renaissance? (Or as some have argued -- for instance, the Göttingen scholar, Georg Misch, in his classic volumes on the History of Autobiography in Antiquity -- as they have appeared over the millennia.)

In musing on this question for the short socially expected duration allowed me, I bypass a more general question. Are the art and craft of autobiography apt to be practiced differently by those variously located in the social and cultural structure: by politician, novelist, sociologist, psychologist, industrialist and Hollywood celebrity; by prophet, priest, agnostic and atheist; by men and women; by the young, not-so-young and comparatively old; and so on through the lists of socially differentiated narrators of their own lives and times? Instead, I limit myself to a few observations on the comparative advantages and disadvantages of autobiography and biography and then focus on the notion of a distinctively sociological autobiography. I do so analytically, not empirically. Mindful of though not entirely persuaded by Karl Popper's warnings of the perils of induction, I do not try

to infer attributes of sociological autobiography inductively by systematically examining the capsule accounts in this volume or the recent spate of book-length accounts by Charles Page, George Homans, Reinhard Bendix, Don Martindale and others, or the surprisingly small number of intellectual autobiographies by sociologists all told since they -- that is to say, we -- first acquired a public identity in the last century. To be sure, Herbert Spencer gave us two volumes of autobiography and Lester Ward, six. Just as we are legatees of/Pitirim Sorokin's A Long Journey and Robert MacIver's As a Tale that is Told (which, as a longtime colleague of them both, I can attest ring descriptively true and analytically latent). But Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, W.I. Thomas and Talcott Parsons are among the many more who have left us nothing by way of autobiography -- although the vast Marx-Engels correspondence provides some compensation.

The sociological autobiography utilizes sociological perspectives, ideas, concepts, findings, and analytical procedures to construct and to interpret the narrative text that purports to tell one's on history within the context of the larger history of one's times. Comparedwith sociological biography, it enjoys the same advantages and suffers the same disadvantages as other forms of autobiography. Put in terms of a workaday sociological concept, autobiographers are the ultimate participants in a dual participant-observer role, having privileged access -- in some respects, monopolistic access -- to their own inner experience. Biographers of self can introspect and retrospect in ways that others cannot do

for them. That advantage is coupled with disadvantages. As we know, introspection and individual memory (as well as collective memory) are subject to patterned distortions and omissions. Those hazards are probably compounded in the sustained introspections and long-term memory drawn upon to reconstruct long stretches of one's past.

Sometimes, it seems, excessively long stretches. As Virginia Woolf noted derivatively, in her long-unpublished autobiographical writings, Moments of Being, there can come a time when one has forgotten far more of significance to an autobiography than one has remembered. (The specific reference was to Lady Strachey, mother of the unruly biographer Lytton, whose "Recollections of a Long Life" were condensed into ten pages or so). Or again, the prolific Heinrich Böll, whose novels and stories were published in 45 languages and issued in some 25 million copies, could only manage, in the absence of diary and journal, an autobiographic fragment of 82 pages which announces that "not one title, not one author, not one book that I held in my hand has remained in my memory."

Still, like biographers, autobiographers can have a measure of control over possible tricks of memory and errors of observation. They too can utilize the historical resource of documents: those often uncalculated evidences of what one did, felt, and thought, and of what one failed to do, feel, and think. In effect, the remembered past then becomes transformed into a series of hypotheses to be checked, so far as they can be, by aggregated documents and

testimonies of others.

In reflecting on the sociological autobiography as a distinctive form, I find it impossible to avoid drawing on a paper of mine, "Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge" (1972). For if the autobiographer has the advantage of being the ultimate Insider, the biographer has the counterpart advantage of more readily being the distanced Outsider. If the one has privileged or monopolistic access to portions and aspects of the inner life, the other more easily achieves the required distance and candor. I would propose that in concept -- not of course necessarily in practice -- the truly sociological autobiography combines the complementary advantages of both Insider and Outsider while minimizing the disadvantages of each.

On still rare occasion, the complementary perspectives of Insider and Outsider can be combined through disciplined collaboration. Witness a condensed prototypal case of the biography of an episode in the history of biology. Here, the biological scientist Joshua Lederberg, who 40 years before had made the consequential discovery of genetic recombination in bacteria, collaborated with the sociologist of science, Harriet Zuckerman, to examine that discovery as a possible case of what was analytically defined as a "postmature scientific discovery": one that was technically achievable earlier with methods then available; expressible in terms understandable by scientists then at work in the field; and capable of having its salient implications appreciated at the earlier time. In this joint inquiry (Nature,

December 1986), the scientist-participant was successively providing personal and public documents to check on personal memories from the perspective of the ultimate Insider while collaborating in the ongoing analysis of the accumulating data with the sociologist-observer working from the perspective of the Outsider. This composite of highly personal materials and analytical distance was plainly required to explore the seemingly self-deprecating sociological hypothesis that one's own scientific discovery, declared by those judges in Stockholm to warrant The Prize, might have been made quite some time before. Collaborations of this kind could make for a much larger corpus of sociological autobiography.

Among other things, then, the sociological autobiography is a personal exercise -- a self-exemplifying exercise -- in the sociology of scientific knowledge. The constructed personal text tells of the interplay between the active agent and the social structure, the interplay between one's sequences of status-sets and role-sets on the one hand and one's intellectual development on the other, with its succession of theoretical commitments, foci of scientific attention, planned or serendipitous choices of problems and choices of strategic research sites for their investigation. Tacitly or explicitly, it draws upon such concepts in the sociology of science as Derek de Solla Price's "invisible colleges," Ludwik Fleck's "thought styles" and "thought collectives," and, to go no further, Thomas Kuhn's "paradigms" and "exemplars" and Gerald Holton's "thematic analysis." The narratives and their interpretations tell of

reference groups and reference individuals, the significant others that helped shape the changing character of thought and inquiry. Tacitly or explicitly, they tell of accumulations of advantage and of disadvantage and of self-fulfilling prophecies, both social and individual, in the domain of developing knowledge. And yet again, tacitly or explicitly, they take note of how dedicated commitment to one or another theoretical orientation or mode of research practice can lead to the self-isolating neglect of alternatives or to civil and, on occasion, to uncivil wars between contending thought collectives.

Not least in this truncated inventory, full-fledged sociological autobiographers relate their intellectual development both to changing social and cognitive micro-environments close at hand and to the encompassing macro-environments provided by the larger society and culture. Put in terms of the thematics of this volume, such accounts bear witness that one's runs of experience and foci of interest, one's accomplishments and failures, were in no small part a function of the historical moment at which one has entered the field. Neophytes coming into the domain of sociology at comparable ages but in different age cohorts -- say, of the 1920s, '40s,'60s and'80s -- have plainly entered into appreciably different historical contexts. The then current state of the disciplinary art differs from the rest as does the larger social and cultural environment. As a result, the initial and later experience of newcomers to the discipline in the different periods is bound to differ significantly

After that last observation, I find myself lapsing into a brief retrospect. It puts me irresistibly in mind of the first annual meeting of this Association I happened to attend. That was in the late 1920s. My treacherous memory estimates -- without my having consulted the records -- the total attendance at that national meeting in Washington at some 200 -- less than a quarter of our number in this one plenary session. In those primitive, sparsely populated days, and thanks to my mentor at Temple University, George E. Simpson, a 17-year-old sophomore like myself could get to meet -- even to talk with -- the likes of a Robert E. Park, W.I. Thomas, William F. Ogburn, and E.A. Ross. He could also listen, most consequentially for him, to the inadvertently recruiting sociological voice of the then University of Minnesota scholar, Pitirim Alexandrovich Sorokin, this several years before he was called to found the Department of Sociology at Harvard. I suspect that undergraduates attending these densely populated meetings -- especially those attending for the first time -- find it rather more difficult to have a reasonably similar experience. And in complementary turn we might ask: how many youngsters can any one of us lingering oldsters manage to cope with? As we sociologists have been known to suggest, numbers, density, and organizational complexity do make a difference to the character of human experience.

A final word. It will be noticed that this bare sketch of some attributes of the sociological autobiography is less a condensed description than a step toward an elucidated concept. It is rather more a normative concept than a summary of a frequent

socio-cultural phenomenon. In that sense, not all auto-biographies by sociologists qualify as sociological auto-biography just as not all sociological autobiography is written by credentialed sociologists. In reading the set of autobiographic accounts in this volume, however, we can sense how and how far the texts, constructed of introspection, retrospection, and interpretation, have been shaped by the sociological consciousness of their authors, and that consciousness, in turn, by the structural contexts in which they found themselves. Those short accounts must condense much into little space. Still, it only requires an attentive sociological eye to see what is being said between the lines as well as on them and to interpolate for our reading selves what the social constraints of allowable space have required the authors to neglect or delete. Perhaps the same attentive readers will do much the same with these brief observations on the concept of sociological autobiography.